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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE  
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AMERICAN INDIANS AND THE SANTA FE

Prior to late 1942 no positive recruiting of Indians was done by the railroads. Indians had been working for the Santa Fe since about 1885 to 1890, but were hired in desultory fashion. These earliest Indian employees were practically all Iagunas and Acomas.

As World War II began making inroads on the working force of America, something had to be done to meet the manpower crisis. Recruiting of Indians was undertaken and particularly directed at the vast 70,000 member Navajo tribe. It was a task of considerable proportions. They lived widely scattered on a 16,000,000 acre reservation and followed a nomadic way of life, and even after they were recruited something had to be done to overcome the language barrier. Suffice it to say these difficulties were overcome and the Indian has taken his place in the American economy as an industrial wage earner.

Our fifteen years' experience in the employment of Indians in large number has brought to a focus certain characteristics. Since the Navajo is the largest tribe by far and consequently represents about 85% of our Indian employees, this tribe is used as an example. Outlined below is an appraisal of the Navajo workers' potential as he is today in the railroad industry.

Assets:

1. Superior manual and finger dexterity.
2. Quick to learn manual trades.
3. Exceptional physical endurance.
4. Calm and placid temperament.
5. Low absenteeism as compared to early years of mass employment.
6. Above average on-the-job safety.
7. Excellent cooperation, particularly when supervised by foreman who understands or tries to understand Indians.
8. Willingness to go anywhere the work happens to be.

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(Statement given by Robert M. Clark, Representative of the President, Santa Fe Railway Company, at a Public Relations Research Association Breakfast. Statement was prepared by L. H. Parker, Employment Supervisor, Santa Fe Railway Company).



Liabilities:

1. Lack of education
2. Reluctance to accept promotion, even though fully qualified.
3. Very small percentage eligible for clerical or administrative positions.

Summarizing the above, the assets far outweigh the liabilities as education now is available to all Navajo children.

Also, it might be mentioned that the Navajo's strong preference for outdoor work is disappearing and many are accepting factory work in increasing numbers and are reported to be doing a creditable job.

At present time there are estimated to be about 2200 Indians in Santa Fe maintenance of way forces. Better than 90% are Navajos. There are approximately 240 in our mechanical forces -- practically all consist of the Pueblo type or village-dwelling Indian, such as the Laguna, Acoma, Hopi, Zuni, Jemez, etc. About 75 to 100 more are dispersed through various other railroad jobs, such as baggage-men, clerks, freight handlers and ice handlers. Four Zuni Indians serve as guides on our Super Chief and El Capitan trains.

Something should be said about the safety performance of the Indian. In addition to his high degree of aptitude for manual skills, he also works safely. Last year one of our rail gang foremen, outlining his experience with a crew of 90 to 95 Indians, beginning in the early spring and closing in the late fall, stated that he did not experience a single personal injury during his tenure as foreman of the gang. It must be realized that in laying steel there are many chances of injury to careless workmen. There is light and heavy moving machinery and heavy tools such as track jacks and lining bars which are used manually. Also, trains must operate over the right-of-way. Not only was the maximum of work accomplished but, equally important, it was done safely.

In the last few years, great strides have been made by Arizona and New Mexico tribes within the uranium industry. Many Indians are employed by those engaged in this work. We have heard of no failure of the Indians developing in this industry. Additionally, the field is still wide open for small manufacturing plants to locate in the area, and suggested industries suitable to the area as follows: cabinet and box factories, wool scouring plants and knitting mills, tanneries and leather products. There are perhaps many other manufacturing plants that could be added. For the industries above mentioned the raw materials are readily available and, to a great extent, the market is close by. Furthermore,

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these industries can easily adapt the Indian's natural manual skills to these operations. The Navajo tribe, for one, is intensely interested in attracting industry to or near the reservation, and has appropriated considerable tribal money to help bring it about.

Summarizing the experience of the Santa Fe with Indians over the years, these points seem to stand out: first, his quickness to learn manual trades; second, his doing the job safely; third, his willingness to go anywhere the work happens to be; fourth, his loyalty during disasters such as the Kansas floods of 1951 and the earthquakes in California in 1952; fifth, his physical stamina to do the work assigned; and sixth, his sense of fair play. These assets will remain with him, and there are excellent prospects that the handicap of lack of education will be a thing of the past in the foreseeable future.

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